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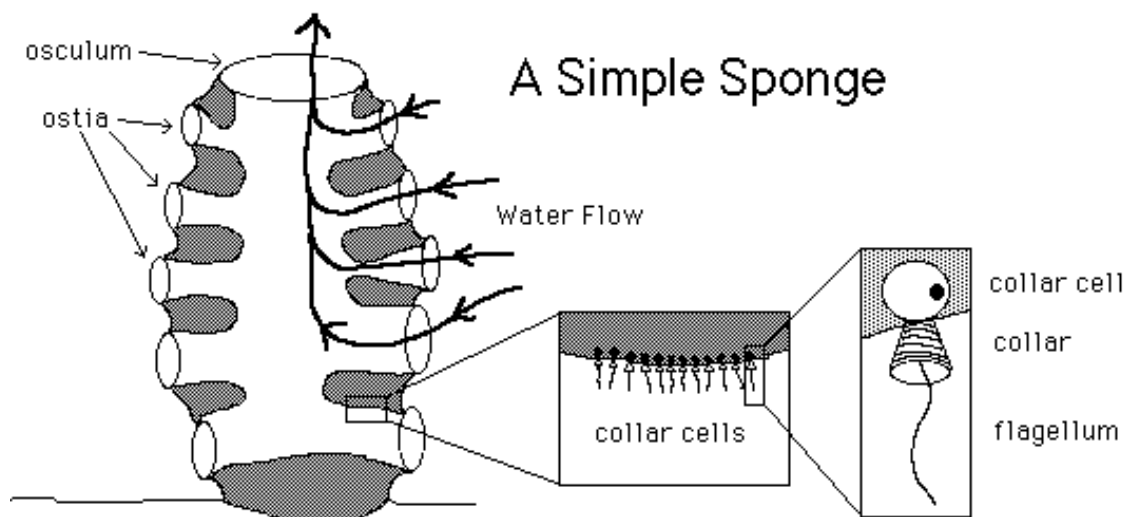
## **Sea Sponge Fishing: Should We or Shouldn't We?**

When I heard that I was required to write a research paper about sponge fishing in the Florida Keys, I immediately knew that I was faced with a challenge. I did not know why or how some people fish for sponges or why other people consider sea sponges to be an important part of our environment. I was sure of one thing: Fishing along Florida's coastline represents much more than just a way of life. For many, fishing IS life. Visitors and locals have a myriad of fishing choices, and they only have to have the desire to fish. From a variety of locations, well-maintained and easily reachable boat ramps provide convenient access to the water.

So, what is a sea sponge, anyway? A sea sponge is a living organism, a form of animal, which has hardly evolved at all. It has been harvested since ancient times, and it has been used in the same form and in the same way as it was by the Greeks and Romans. They used the sponge for their helmets and for their baths. Their servants used them for cleaning tables,

mopping floors, and for general house cleaning. As we can see, the sponge is a very useful item to have.

Today, there are over 9000 varieties of sponges, as we discover in Matley's article, "What Exactly Is a Sponge, Anyway?" They grow in almost any body of water, except fresh inland water and lakes. They are unable to move around; therefore, they attach themselves to a rock, a piece of coral, or something else. Sponges do not have a nervous system, digestive organ, or circulatory system. By filtering the water, they are able to eat small bacteria and small organisms, and they are able to absorb the oxygen—oxygen used for breathing.



**The cross-section of a simple sponge. Illustration © 1996 O.R.G., Inc.**

We can find a good sketch of a simple sponge—which depicts very well the water flow through a sponge—on the web page, “Sponges: The Weird Wonders of the Seas!” (Screen).

Exactly how do people fish for sponges? Amazingly, in a very similar way they fish: with a hook attached to a long pole. The best method is to use a bucket with a glass bottom. The person in a boat looks through the bucket, cuts off the sponge, hooks it and pulls it up to the surface. This is a widely used method in shallow water. In the past, another way to fish for sea sponges was with the help of divers—diving with compressed air or other gas supplied from the surface (surface air) or with compressed air or other gas in a container carried by the diver (scuba). This method was costly, both in lives and time, and it is no longer practiced.

Currently, the most popular sponge fishing method is practiced with a specialized sponge fishing boat. The boat is usually about 40 feet long and has sleeping and galley accommodation for about five men. They will sometimes stay out searching and fishing for sponges, for as long as two months.

Why do people prefer natural sponges to synthetic ones? Natural sponges last longer because they are more resistant to abrasion. They are also more absorbent than a synthetic sponge. They soak up and hold more water

without dripping; therefore, for cleaning, natural sponges are better than other materials. Through their intricate system of canals, natural sponges are self-cleaning; thus, they wash out faster and easier and do not retain odors, unlike other materials. Because of their greater durability, over time, they appear to be more economical. They are softer and get into corners better, and they do not peel as easily as do synthetic sponges.

Many different industries use sponges. Therefore, for suppliers and resellers, natural sponges represent a great income source. While I was browsing the Internet, I found a few web sites where the sea sponges are sold as art products. From the online web site, *Unique Sponge Sculptures*, one can buy an “All-Natural Vase Sponge” for “only” \$34.99 (Screen).

On the online web site, *Specialty Sponge Company*, the sea sponges are sold as “Artist Sponges.” They are described as “special purpose sponges used for canvas painting and other artistic pursuits” (Screen). On the same web site, one can also buy bath sponges.

Believe it or not, a new use for the sea sponge is as a “Yoni Organic Tampon,” which is nothing more than a menstrual tampon. The alleged advantages are that Yoni tampons are “extremely comfortable and secure,” convenient and...reusable up to six months—although I can’t possibly imagine one single reason why someone would even consider reusing a

tampon (“Yoni,” screen). The site also alleges that Yoni tampons are not linked to the Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), a rare disease believed to be caused by a form of *Staphylococcus Aureus*. So, for only AUD \$29.95, one can buy a kit of Yoni tampons that will last up to six months—that is, if one decides to reuse them.

As we can see, there are many different uses for natural sponges. People often use them for bathing, house cleaning, or as an income source, whether they sell them as a plain sponge or as an art product.

Only recently, people have realized that their efforts to restore the coastal water quality and salinity, sea grasses, mangroves, coral reefs and other habitats—also, to protect and restore the endangered species—are not possible without the presence of these little “soldiers,” the sea sponges. The article, “Sponges Serve As Water Filter,” highlights the overlooked fact that sea sponges contribute to a healthy marine environment (Hardie, screen). Therefore, if we want to preserve the coastal water quality, it is necessary that we control and limit sea sponge fishing—one of the main causes that endangers sponges.

However—as John M. Stevely revealed in his study, “Sponge Populations in Florida Bay,” conducted during the 1993 summer sampling period—human activity is not the only reason that sponges are endangered. Although the

findings were not conclusive, “dissolved oxygen or phytoplankton toxicity may have contributed to the mortalities” (Par. 3). In the fourth paragraph of the aforementioned report, we also find that some recovery of the sponge population appeared to take place; however, not all species recovered. The recovery process for a decimated sea sponge population usually takes at least five years; in some cases, it can take more than ten years.

In the summer of 2000, a terrible disease attacked the Mediterranean sponge, causing a total destruction of the sponge population. “Similar sponge kills broke out in the Gulf of Mexico in the 1940s, ’70s and ’90, severely affecting Florida’s sponge industry” (“Sponge bug,” par. 11). Realizing how fragile these little creatures are, it is only normal that we have to increase our efforts in our attempt to protect and preserve them.

Because they provide a safe shelter for numerous little marine creatures, sea sponges represent an important habitat for a variety of sea life. Lobsters, stone crabs, toadfish, octopus, and others use sea sponges as a safe shelter.

Over the last decade, particularly in the last few years, people have started to acknowledge the fact that the endangered sea sponge population plays an active role in the maintenance of the water quality along the coastline. People have also recognized that the water quality is very important for our health and for the marine environment. Therefore, we must do our best to at

least try to control sea sponge fishing, since diseases—which can have a very devastating result on the sea sponge population—are hard to prevent and cure with today’s technology and resources.

I consider that it is our duty to try to preserve and protect the sea sponge, an essential contributor to the quality of our marine environment. By filtering the water, and by providing a safe shelter for a multitude of sea life, these little creatures are doing a giant’s job. Giving up the sea sponge in our daily routine is a small sacrifice that we can all make. Without clean water, how can we even enjoy our bath?

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